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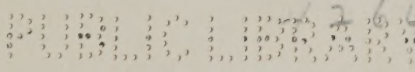
THE MAN, — THE DEED, — THE EVENT:

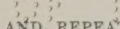
A

SERMON

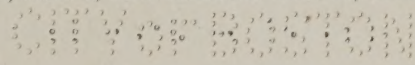
PREACHED IN

THE FIRST CHURCH, DORCHESTER





On Sunday, Dec. 4, and repeated Dec. 11, 1859.



BY NATHANIEL HALL.

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SERMON.

John xi. 50: "IT IS EXPEDIENT FOR US THAT ONE MAN SHOULD DIE FOR THE PEOPLE."

THE American Pulpit can have but one theme to-day. To decline, for any other, that given in the public tragedy whose shadow is yet upon us, would be to turn away from the very call of God, as heard in his providence, — heard in the awakened minds and quickened sensibilities of a people. So, at least, do I feel it, and must do accordingly. I have forborne to speak hitherto of the affair thus consummated, not because it has not had for me an absorbing interest, but because I wished to wait until that consummation should have passed, until it should wear its death-crown, and be given over in its wholeness, as now it is, to the keeping of history. I have forborne too, let me add, because I have stood in awe — as I do still — before an event so full of significance, so full of teaching, so full of God, lest I might not interpret it aright; lest in a human weakness, through

sympathy with the cause in whose interest it befell, I might be led to see in it more, or beneath the influence of contagious opinion, in a human weakness still, which suffers others' judgments to becloud the moral vision, I might see less, than in truth was there. I would simply see what is there, and tell what I see.

On Friday last, the 2d of December, a man, accused and convicted of capital offences against the laws of Virginia, was publicly executed therefor under those laws. What is there here to quicken the pulses of a nation? What is there in this, that the eyes of twenty millions of people should have been turned, on that day, to that scaffold, — some in tearful sympathy, some in exulting scorn, some in depressing fears, but all with a commanding *interest;* an interest which, for weeks before, had waited, as for nothing else, for the words spoken in his imprisonment, as the million-voiced press reported them, in every dwelling in the land? What is there in this, that the sudden death-knell of the patriarch-prince of American letters, laurelled with the purest admiration of three generations, should have been comparatively unnoticed, in anticipation of that of this sentenced felon? Let us expand that statement of the occurrence by its interconnected facts, and we shall see.

A man of threescore years, of New-England birth, of Puritan descent, and marked in youth and manhood

by the characteristic virtues of that noble stock; a man nurtured upon the Bible; a man of prayer; a man in whom the religious element was the ruling and inciting one; a man, the uncompromising sternness of whose integrity was in union with a childlike simplicity and a self-denying benevolence, — this man, for following out the impulse of that benevolence, in a certain way, towards a certain class; for putting his religion into forceful deeds; for obeying the inward call, as doubly heard in conscience and in heart; for seeking to give freedom to an outcast race, whose oppressions he had borne, through a score of years, as if they were his own; for "remembering," in the only way that seemed to him effective, — in the way, as he felt, which Heaven ordered him, — "them that are in bonds, as bound with them;" for striking a sacrilegious blow at the Dagon of a nation's worship, whereto government, society, religion, commerce, law, obsequiously bow down, — *this man*, *for this*, on the day and place aforesaid, was hung as a malefactor; and hence, in these added facts of the case, hence essentially, that wide-spread interest and deep sensation the event produced. It was the man, it was the motive, it was the object; it was the deed, not in itself, but in its revelations; in its results manifest, and those, far more, of which it is the prophecy and the harbinger, at once the seed and the germinating influence.

The man and the event, — they offer themselves as distinct sources of instruction and impression. There are differences of opinion respecting the man; though only, I believe, — which is most remarkable, — in this particular manifestation of himself. But, let these differences be what they may, while they will affect the moral teaching of their related point, — the man in his deed, — making it more or less, or not at all, impressive, it need not affect, in the least, the lessons from the *event*, — the event as such, and in its attendant revelations and practical suggestiveness.

First, the man and the deed; the man *in* his deed. I see in him — as may already have been inferred — an heroic nobleness; a moral intrepidity; an unflinching conscientiousness; a religious self-devotion; a resolute pursuance, for years, of a purpose to which his soul was wedded by holiest ties; which he had espoused, before Heaven, as divine; had sworn to be faithful to, through all hazards, at any cost, unto death; and for which, at last, in a lofty disregard of personal consequences, in an unquestioning confidence in a righteous God, he hazarded and gave his life. It is the *motive* stamps the deed; it is the *purpose* makes the man, morally regarded. Call him, if you will, mistaken, foolish, — mistaken as to the justifiableness of the means employed, foolish in his estimate of the efficiency of those means in relation to his end. What has it to do with the moral rightness and wisdom of

the man? If you deny him the attribute of a prudential rationality, you must accord him the virtues, in glorious measure, of courage, magnanimity, humaneness, truth. If you deny him a perfect apprehension of the Christian law, you must accord to him a whole-souled allegiance to what he *did* apprehend as such. If you call him, in disparagement, an *Old*-Testament Christian, you must allow him to have been *that:* ay, and more than that he was; combining with a holy valor a philanthropy, which, in the choice of its objects and the disinterestedness of its aim, only Christianity could inspire. If you say he believed in a "God of battles," he believed, at any rate, in a God who battled for *right* as against wrong, for the *oppressed* as against the oppressor, and who puts swords into his servants' hands, to do, if need be, likewise.

This, at least, we *know* of John Brown, — that he allied himself, head and heart and hand, with the legally oppressed class in this country; that he saw, that he felt, as if they were his own, the wrongs they suffer, and gave his all, himself, for their deliverance. Whatever we may deny about him, of whatever we may be doubtful, *so much* we *know*. His veracity is unimpeachable; even his enemies confess, and stood in awe before it; and this *he* asserts of himself. His wife also, widow now, of noble worth, testifies to this feeling and purpose as among the deepest and dearest

of his heart. "He has borne," she says, "the yoke of the oppressed, as if upon his neck, for thirty years." Every thing known of him, every thing said of him, by reliable witnesses; his whole past; the interval, above all, of his imprisonment, and his sublimely-met end, — all force us to the belief, that in the spirit of a compassionating benevolence, joined with a fervid love of justice and of right, he had made it, by prayer and vow, the one leading object of his life, to emancipate, as best he might, the enslaved. Nor is there any thing to show that personal motives of any sort, of a character sordid or ambitious or revengeful, mingled at all with the highest — no, not even the *latter* — marvellous height of moral attainment, in view of his own heart-rending experience of the bereaving cruelties of the slave-power. *See him thus*, in this light alone, as one who, in the consciousness of a righteous cause, and in pity for an outcast and despised race, in a sublime recklessness opposed himself to a nation's prostituted power, — a recklessness which had in it, it may be, a higher wisdom, a truer sanity, seen from its providential point, than we yet can know; — see him thus, and how can we but honor him? If we honor those in all the ages who have dared and died for the oppressed; if we honor the martyrs for liberty on our own soil; nay, I speak it reverently, if we honor Christ, who identified himself with the poor and forsaken, and calls upon his follow-

ers to do so, in sacrificing service, — how can we but honor the memory of this executed man? See the man in his motive, and tell me why. Separate the circumstances which involve not the moral character of his enterprise from those which express it, and tell me why. God save us from that inability to discriminate between the mere form, providential or mistaken, of the manifestation of a principle, and its essential being and activity; from that prejudiced and perverted vision, which shall let any of his true heroes pass unmarked by us as such, whether in public or private life, seated in power or dangling from a gallows, crowned with success or crushed by failure! For myself, I rejoice that He has raised up such a one in the person of this humble man. I rejoice that He has startled a nation, given to selfish toils and demeaning indulgences and base expediences, by the unwonted apparition of a *man;* a man heroically earnest for righteousness' sake; a man daring to follow a principle, wheresoever it may lead; to put his religion into act, and take the consequences, though one be death. Some call this fanaticism; some call it madness. Would to God there were more of it in the world, call it what they may; more vital faith in principles, in God, in a God of righteousness, a present God, a helping God; a faith that would keep men from everlastingly calculating the probable and the expedient, as if there was no Being wiser and

stronger than they; as if right was not always the expedient, to abide by it the only success!

I hope to be understood, as one speaking on this subject is very likely not to be. I have spoken approvingly of the principles and motives of the man, as apart from the course he was led by these to adopt. That that course had the approval of his own conscience, that it seemed right to him, there can be no doubt; and while, in our judgment of it, we are allegiant to our truer view, as we deem it, of the Christian law, let us not do his memory the injustice to ascribe to him what he did not design. How does it appear, though so generally assumed, that he designed to employ force, aggressively and destructively, in the accomplishment of his purpose, or to incite the slaves to insurrection? On the contrary, he says of himself, in his speech before the court, — this man whose word was truth,—"I never did intend murder or treason, or the destruction of property, or to incite slaves to rebellion, or to make insurrection: I never encouraged men to do so, but always discouraged any idea of the kind." He had given freedom to slaves elsewhere, "without," as he says, "the snap of a gun." He meant to do it here on a larger scale, but, if possible, at the same bloodless cost; though, I confess, it seems to me the fanaticism of credulity to suppose it could be so. He would have confronted with his mustering forces, Moses-like, this later Pharaoh, with

a "Thus saith the Lord, Let my people go;" an unresisting obedience to which mandate would doubtless, so far as *he* was concerned, have been followed by a peaceable retreat. That he would have employed or countenanced force, in recklessness or revenge, for aught but self-defence in humanity's cause, is, as the man has shown himself to us, a moral impossibility.

I believe in truth and love as the overcoming power of moral evil. I would not compromise my adhesion to this, as eminently the Christian rule, through my admiration of those, who, though from highest motives, for noblest ends, make use of aggressive force. But let us be consistent, and not condemn it in John Brown at Virginia, while we applaud it, as employed by great historic names, in other lands and our own, for ends no more worthy, that lifted to Heaven a far *less* beseeching appeal. Is it *success* gives merit to undertakings for human freedom? or the *theatre* whereon enacted? or the *race* in whose behalf? And let those, who are so ready to make use of Christ's teaching as ground for condemnation in the instance before us, remember that his precept of non-resistance is not his only one; that he had something to say about *love and duty to one's neighbor;* that he commended especially to our imitation him who found his "neighbor" in the man who had "*fallen among thieves*," and staid to bless him, though priest and Levite passed.

I pass from the man and the deed to the event, as a distinct source of instruction and impression.

And, first, it yields new and more convincing proofs of the diabolicalness of that "institution," which demands, in order to its safety, its existence, the death of the bravely true, the morally heroic; which dares not pardon such, dares not imprison merely, dares not delay the fatal end, but must straightway kill: or, to put it in another form, that system which demands for its support laws against which the natural conscience, the religious sense, rebels; which makes that treason which God makes duty, and counts those felons whom the universal heart calls heroes. Here is a man distinguished for his moral nobility, his love of truth, honor, justice, benevolence, — for his unshrinking fealty to these, — and Virginia hangs him. "He broke her laws." Yes, but only because the law of Eternal Justice was broken in their enactment; because they stood between prostrate millions and the uplifting boon and birthright which the God within him yearned to give them. *Slavery* hung him. Of course it would. It can do nothing better with a true man, for its own interest's sake. What a condition of things has this affair caused a revelation of in the Slaveholding States! What a condition of things to exist in one-half of a Christian republic! Such fears of truth; such suppression of honest speech; where peace and safety can only be secured

by stifling — ay, below a whisper — the noblest sentiments of the soul; where the Bible is regarded, and dealt with, as offensively incendiary, and can only be tolerated by covering up its golden rule, its parable of the good Samaritan, and its other humanities! What a state of society, when a score of men, entering it at its borders, and asserting God's claim upon his stolen children, and going to work to enforce it, cause a panic of terror through an entire population, which every light upon the horizon, the most insignificant occurrence, renews and heightens, — a terror for what *they* may do, who, we are told, are so contented and happy, and gratefully attached! Truly, one may well divide his pity between the slaveholder and the slave.

Again: the event gives new and startling proof of the instability of the social system built on slavery, — of slavery itself as an instituted power. Above what volcanic possibilities is the South seen to stand, — does *it* see itself to stand, — which may flame at any moment into dire realities; the igniting sparks of truth flying in all the winds of heaven without, and vainly striven against lest they should light within! The danger most fearful to the South, and most imminent, is not from abroad. Left to itself, — so far as the all-pervading spirit of the age *can* leave it, so far as any direct interference is concerned, — it is left with its worst enemy, in the elements self-

engendered in its own bosom. What may not be, when once those fettered millions know their might; when they know, as this event will help them to, the fact of an existing sympathy for them beyond their borders, but only just beyond, may be within, — a sympathy willing to peril life for their deliverance? What may not be, when that other element of danger (the non-slaveholders), seething in secret, none may know how hotly, — for it has no organ of expression to the world nor to itself, — when *this* element shall find vent in voice and deed, and know and use its now arrogantly despised power? It is idle to deny the fact of this insecurity and peril. It is seen by this occurrence as it had not been before. And was it not to be looked for, in the very nature of things, by the very ordinance of the Almighty? A system, social or civil, founded in injustice, — must it not bear within it the elements of rottenness and evil? Well may it be that the event under consideration has drawn attention anew to so grave a fact, has furnished new testimony to it; well for the South, — God grant it! — in its insane clinging to slavery as a good; well for the North, in its wicked complicity and irresolute paltering with so great a wrong.

Again: this event has shown the South, what it has seemed unable to conceive, that the opposition to slavery at the North is not the offspring of sectional hate or sentimental heat, of self-interest or passion,

but of a constraining principle, of a religiously-felt obligation. John Brown represents to them and to the world, in the inciting and pervading motive of his enterprise, the true grounds of that opposition, deep and abiding as the principles of rectitude and mercy. He had nothing to gain by it of an earthly sort, if he succeeded; every thing to lose, if he failed. There was no feeling of retaliation or revenge to be gratified. He was willing to sacrifice his all for those of whom he knew no more than that they were enslaved, towards whom he had no other relation than the human, whose claim on him was that alone of suffering and helplessness. The antislavery reform is a moral and religious one. The abolitionists have stood, from the beginning, — and it is this which has given a moral dignity and glory to their enterprise, lifting it far above all political movements, — they have stood on the essential and eternal right, and based their appeals on that to the conscience and the heart. Hence their success. Hence, whatever they have gained they have gained for ever. There is, there can be, no ebb to the on-sweeping tide of antislavery sentiment. How preposterous to think to stay it by politic deprecations, to think to bind it by constitutional compacts and judicial decisions! I tell you they shall be as stubble before its majestic swell.

Again: the event yields new illustration of the

vast superiority, in potential influence, of deeds to words. There have been torrents of speech — declamation, argument, persuasion, invective — levelled for years, in the Free States, against the slave-power. Nor has it been in vain. It was needed. It has wrought incalculable good. But here is one so terribly in earnest, so meaning what he says, that he *must act;* that, throwing himself unreservedly upon his principles, he *does* act; and does thus, whatever he fails to do, a work for freedom — so it would seem, viewed in its higher bearings — which years of words alone had failed to do. The lesson is not that such like deeds are to be repeated, or are in themselves right. By no means. But *this*, that *deeds*, *some* deeds, such as our avowed principles authorize and demand of us, should back our words, should prove our earnestness, would we be efficient instruments against the instituted iniquity of our land. This faithful servant of God put his life-swaying idea and feeling into that embodiment which seemed to and for him worthy and right and best; and has gained by it a success different from, but far beyond, all that he proposed to himself or hoped for. Obedience to a conviction, — self-sacrificing, *life*-sacrificing obedience, — it can shake even the citadel of American Slavery. *Life*-sacrificing, I say. What a power there is in blood, freely given and poured forth for a righteous end! They little knew, who heard it, the

profound significance, prophetically hidden, of that saying uttered in the Jewish Sanhedrim, with reference to him, the divine Emancipator, at whom it so blindly aimed, — "It is expedient for us that one man die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not." *We* little know what sacred expediency may be yet shown to be involved in this recent dying; how much it may do, in the workings of a spiritual Providence, to save a nation's perishing.

Friends, who can doubt that a crisis is approaching in the conflict, truly called "irrepressible," between freedom and slavery, in our country? Let us feel that we each have an influence — however small, not unimportant — in the great decision; and let us employ it, as God may give the opportunities, in the true spirit of his Christ, for freedom, humanity, himself; putting a cheerful and untrembling faith in the overruling and righteous Providence.

"All is best; though we oft doubt
What the unsearchable dispose
Of highest Wisdom brings about,
And ever best found in the close.
Oft he seems to hide his face,
But unexpectedly returns,
And to his faithful champions, soon or late,
Bears witness gloriously."